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Movies

Compelling 'Vigil'

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It takes all of about a minute before you realize that Fiona Kay, the young star of the New Zealand film "Vigil," is a remarkable screen actress. And once you lock into her performance you're locked in for good, unable to look away even for an instant.

Child actors often have an openness in front of the camera that naturally allows them to work in an easy, unaffected manner. Kay has that quality of ease, but I don't know that I've ever seen a young actress display the combination of restraint and sheer power that she shows here. To find comparisons, I'm reminded not of any contemporary actress, but of earlier, silent screen performers—of Lillian Gish and Maria Falconetti. And if that sounds like high praise, that is precisely what is intended.

Perhaps actors from the silent days come to mind because there is so little dialogue in "Vigil" and because Kay is called upon to communicate her character completely through the tiniest, subtlest gestures and expressions. Or perhaps because she possesses the same sort of compacted intensity that they had.

Her character, whose name is Toss, is around 12 (Kay's age when the film was shot) and just on the brink of becoming a woman. She lives with her father and mother and her grandfather on a sheep farm in the raw New Zealand hills, but shortly after the movie opens the father tumbles to his death as he is trying to rescue a sheep that has fallen down a ravine.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, Toss' mother Elizabeth (Penelope Stewart), a striking ex-ballerina, de-

cides to put the farm up for sale. The grandfather (Bill Kerr) has other ideas, though, and hires Ethan (Frank Whitten), the hunter who carried the father's body back to the farm, to help keep the place going.

The death of the father and Ethan's arrival immediately create odd disturbances and sexual stirrings in Toss—especially after the tension between Ethan and Elizabeth blossoms into a full-blown affair—and we can see her trying to deal with these new emotions as they crowd in on her.

Innumerable movies have dealt with the theme of a young woman's coming of age, but director Vincent Ward and his young star have penetrated deep into their subject and mined something hauntingly unexpected.

In "Vigil," Ward gives us images that play like blasted poetry. The mood of the film is dark and portentous, as if somewhere off in the distance a terrible danger lurks. And though we sense that far-off threat, we never know precisely what it is—or at least until late in the film.

Sex and death and the starkly dramatic pastoral imagery that Ward and the cinematographer, Alun Bollinger, have provided become interwoven, so much so that almost every frame seems to carry a double load of meaning.

The film isn't wholly successful, but what Ward has given us here has both fragility and weight. When we see Toss examining herself in a mirror stashed away in an old car in the middle of a field, her torso bare to the waist, we feel that we are privy to a secret communication that is taking place between the girl and her image in the glass.

There is something devastatingly frank about the way in which Toss' eyes search for information, for some shred of data that might clue her in to the changes happening to her. And afterward, we can't get her features out of our heads. In her face, a soul is laid bare.

Vigil, at the Biograph, is unrated but contains some adult material.